

What remains

AUFGELÖST. A multi-hour performance project in public spaces

So many things. But where do they actually come from? Cups, plates, cutlery. Wooden spoons, chopping boards, spices. Plums, cherries, gooseberries and beans in preserving jars, exactly 19 of them. Is the fruit still edible? Dark living room furniture, long since out of fashion. Traditional carpets. A double bed and a dressing table with a triptych mirror. Three perfume bottles, a bouquet of pink artificial roses. Who did they once mean something to? Clothes hangers. Shoes. Four boxes of books. Would they still be of interest to a second-hand bookshop? “All these things can still be used and still have a value,” insists Daniel Ernesto Müller. Sitting among the household effects arranged by Angie Hiesl + Roland Kaiser on the Rudolfplatz square in Cologne, the performer makes up stories about the items and their former owner.

The real owner of the items remains a secret and the owner’s identity is not revealed in the project entitled AUFGELÖST (Dissolved). The stories related by Daniel Ernesto Müller during the three-and-a-half hour solo performance are fictitious – or they may perhaps be slightly autobiographical. No one knows exactly. The boundaries between the two are pretty fluid. Daniel Ernesto Müller improvises different stories for each of the three performances in autumn 2022.

The household effects on display in the centre of Cologne come from a flat that was being cleared following the death of its occupant. With the consent of the relatives, Angie Hiesl + Roland Kaiser used furniture, selected household items and clothing to create an extensive installation in which Daniel Ernesto Müller can act, reflect and narrate as a solo performer. Measuring 10 by 15 metres, the setting is positioned in such a way that the audience can walk around it but should rather not enter. Now and again, autumn leaves from nearby trees drop into the scenery. It’s a melancholic picture.

On display is the estate of a rather unassuming woman who was born in the late 1920s. Clothes, shoes, walking sticks, hygiene articles, underwear. Daniel Ernesto Müller is almost boyish in his search for what remains of a person who is no longer there, who owned these things – an individual scent, a certain aura. What he actually finds are objects, things: “That is what remains at the end.”

In 2022, 1.06 million people died in Germany, according to provisional data from the Federal Statistical Office. This means that a lot of people are faced with the question of what remains at the end. AUFGELÖST therefore attracts a high level of public interest. Cologne’s Rudolfplatz serves as an open-air theatre, narration space and place for reflection. Against the massive backdrop of the Hahnentorburg, one of the gates in Cologne’s medieval city wall, a fictional biography is gradually created in which parting and death as a person’s ultimate demise are embedded in a family story. The traffic, the city and its noise in the background are the co-stars that serve as a reminder of the everyday lives of the living. “But we have to keep going,” says Müller, half in desperation, half in invocation.

Located on Cologne’s inner ring road, Rudolfplatz is one of the city’s main squares. This is where the Hohenzollernring becomes the Habsburgerring and intersects with the busy Aachener Strasse. It is a popular area for shopping and going out but material poverty and homelessness

are also evident. The public transport stop for trams, buses and underground trains is well used at all times of the day and night. Cafés and shops are not far away. To put it slightly dramatically, Rudolfplatz is the epitome of urban life – a fitting place to reflect publicly on death, a topic we often prefer to forget.

Talking about death

Most cultures have rituals surrounding how people deal with death and the dead. In Christianity, Judaism and Islam, to name just three of the world's main religions, death is seen as a separation of body and soul, as a transition to another state and as a passage to another place. Believers are promised resurrection and eternal life – or threatened, depending on your point of view. The Christian afterlife is divided into precisely mapped areas ranging from hell to purgatory to heavenly paradise. The idea of life in a heavenly Garden of Eden is somewhat comforting. However, for those who don't believe in the immortality of the soul or even the physical resurrection at the end of all days, knowledge of one's own inevitable demise is a situation that most people would rather push to the back of their minds. Death and dying are generally considered to be unpleasant and depressing topics of conversation that are preferably avoided. "It's really not easy to talk about death," says performer Daniel Ernesto Müller.

Despite the flood of images in the media and the evening corpse on the TV detective series, direct confrontation with death has become rare, especially in those parts of the world where there is no war. At present, more people in Germany die in a hospice, a hospital or an old people's home than they do at home surrounded by their family. Even hearses are difficult to recognise on the streets because most undertakers are at pains to be discreet. It's therefore not surprising that there are a large number of euphemisms for talking about death and dying. People pass away peacefully, make their last journey, meet their maker, push up daisies or – less pleasantly – bite the dust or go west.

Both the arts and fairy tales personalise death. The Godfather of Death, the grim reaper or the image of a skeleton – almost every culture uses the human skull to symbolise death. We could continue the list of vanitas symbols but the work by Angie Hiesl + Roland Kaiser focuses on the mundaneness and normality of death. It is less a matter of symbolic elevation than of the practicality of dealing with a situation in which a person is no longer there but their possessions are. What do we do with all the things that once made up a household? A presence that has passed, the unknown former owner of the estate is the imaginary focus of the performance on Rudolfplatz. An empty space which Daniel Ernesto Müller fills with fantasy, empathy and very genuine stories.

AUFGELÖST is the first collaboration between Angie Hiesl + Roland Kaiser and Daniel Ernesto Müller and came about by chance, as everyone involved emphasises. In private, the dancer, performer and choreographer has trained as an end-of-life volunteer and the things he has experienced in this process are the starting point for a series of different stories. As he recounts in his performance on Rudolfplatz, it is about supporting life, not death.

Appropriating objects

Müller wears blue trousers, sneakers and a reddish orange pullover over a black roll-neck with small creoles in each ear (costume designer: Rupert Franzen). The colours are bright and the fabrics well-tailored. However, the outfit is still reminiscent of the clothing worn by workmen or removal men – helpful spirits. Müller takes a charming approach to sifting through, sorting and reorganising the items of the legacy. He turns large pieces of furniture into whimsical sculptures that are entirely unsuitable for any further use. He shoulders an exercise bike hung with jackets so that the two seem to create a symbiosis. Then, at other times, Müller stretches out on the carpet cuddling a number of cushions.

However, his attention is really focused on the little things. A coffee service is arranged on the floor, clearly separated into cups, plates and saucers. All kinds of spoons are laid out in rows, with chopping boards and other kitchen utensils next to them. Grey, black and beige shoes (and there are a lot of them) are removed from their boxes one by one and arranged in a long line across the performance area. The aesthetics of tidying up can be seen as a metaphor. Müller is laying out a lifeline as he runs to and fro, volubly wondering how many shoes can be acquired by one household. The women in the audience smile indulgently, knowingly.

In AUFGELÖST, the movement of the items and the performer contrasts with the stories, all of which relate to everyday life. The items are moved, rearranged and taken out of their usual context to become exhibits, while the performer's physical presence contrasts with their disappearance and the clearance of the household. A relationship based on appropriation and reinterpretation is established between his body and the items. In part, the humour is absurd and emphasises the strangeness so that familiar items can be viewed differently. One example of this is when Müller stands in a wardrobe and creates a mobile out of coat hangers while he recalls the last meeting with a dying person and strikes up a song: *"Lieber Gott, lass die Sonne wieder scheinen"* (Dear God, let the sun shine again). As a footnote for film buffs, this song was sung by 11-year-old Cornelia Froboess in the film of nearly the same name (without the reference to God). The film was very successful and the song quickly became popular. Even if someone doesn't know who Cornelia Froboess is or isn't familiar with the song, Müller's farewell story, reminiscent of childhood, is a very moving moment.

It goes without saying that a solo performance lasting several hours is draining, especially for someone as active as Daniel Ernesto Müller. It is thus understandable that he occasionally stages an absence by hiding between the pillows and duvets on the bed or disappearing into the cupboard at the bottom of a living room dresser – with just a leg sticking out – acting like a child and talking about Christmas. Left alone with his voice and the items, the audience is drawn into the sometimes funny, sometimes very sad family stories.

Man as a narrator

Angie Hiesl + Roland Kaiser have often integrated text(s) into their productions but never on the scale of AUFGELÖST. In this work, the text plays a special role because it is used as a means of creating a respectful distance. The life that has been lived by an unknown person is narrated rather than enacted.

In this way, Angie Hiesl + Roland Kaiser make use of a medium that has always been deployed successfully by artists and others to deal with reality. "Stories are told in order to 'kill'

something. In the most harmless, but not least important case: to kill time. In another and more serious case: to kill fear,” according to philosopher Hans Blumenberg. If one is to believe Blumenberg, the social functionality of narrative lies in the possibility of overcoming the fear of the unknown and developing trust in the world. Arranging events in a story transforms the complexity and contradiction of the human experience into something that is clear, understandable and plausible.

For some time, humanities and the arts have no longer just referred to *homo sapiens* – the wise or rational human – but to *homo narrans* – the storytelling human. “Narrative plays a role in any discussion of social significance,” writes Albrecht Koschorke in his theory of narrative. On the one hand, narratives create meaning and communicate values. However, they also provide scope for experimentation and serve as entertainment.

The theory that can be outlined only briefly here finds its artistic expression in AUFGELÖST. The fear of the emptiness left by a dead person is confronted with an abundance of stories. In addressing the question of how to talk about death, Angie Hiesl + Roland Kaiser have devised a concept of developing stories in the situation of tidying and sorting – intuitively, spontaneously and without a script. The rehearsals for the performance did not use the household effects from the installation but took place at other places using different items. In other words, Daniel Ernesto Müller improvises the biographical episodes and family anecdotes on the basis of his direct confrontation with the items that are on show. This approach may be what gives AUFGELÖST its authenticity, charm and profound humanity.

Although each performance is structured in the same way, the narrative exploration in the life stories told by Müller is always different. The only things he defines before each performance are the names and the family relationships of his protagonists. Sometimes the person is called Helene, sometimes Erika, sometimes Anni-Hanni, the latter born on 4 April 1928. The life that Müller invents for Anni-Hanni is that of a housewife and mother of three who lived in the same home for 55 years. Noting that he knew the deceased well, he describes her youth and how she waited for Adam, the man who became her husband, after he was taken prisoner when serving as a soldier during the Second World War. Müller tells of tragic accidents, her children growing up and the loneliness of old age. He vividly describes the boredom that sets in when there is nothing except silence and how Anni-Hanni made a habit of going for a walk around her flat with the vacuum cleaner.

Everyday sounds

Müller switches on the vacuum cleaner while he is talking and the hum – more like a hiss – of the old Vampyrette accompanies his brief pas de deux with the appliance. The performance is not only underscored – or rather overlaid – with urban noise like traffic, as already mentioned, but also with the noise of household appliances and quiet everyday sounds: the clatter of crockery, the clicking of shoes on the floor and the clinking of glasses as they are placed on a table or knocked together in a toast.

The acoustics of AUFGELÖST are dominated by the sound from five megaphones which serve as both recording and playback devices. Daniel Ernesto Müller makes regular recordings that are then broadcast on loop across the Rudolfplatz. Sometimes these are aphorisms from his

narratives or pieces of advice or difficult questions addressed to the audience: “How would you like to die?” Or more provocatively: “Have you ever thought about just ending it all?” No one reacts but the questions have an impact.

The megaphones and the recordings they broadcast are co-stars with the role of creating an acoustic point of reference. As the audience permanently changes during the three-and-a-half-hour performance, the recordings are repeated and give structure to the process, even for those people who stay longer or actually stay for the entire time. And that is not such a small number. As is always the case with the works of Angie Hiesl + Roland Kaiser in public spaces, the audience consists of different groups. There are those who have chosen to come to the performance, those who were brought along and those who pass by chance. Many passers-by stop and take videos or photos to capture the moment that will not come back. Some of them stay longer than they intended and use one of the stools provided to watch how Daniel Ernesto Müller traces a woman’s life with both sensitivity and humour.

And then there are those who are more interested in the objects than in the performance. There is an older woman sizing up the vests that are on display or a small group of younger women who would like to buy the bed linen. These interventions of reality demonstrate the urgency of addressing sustainability even in such seemingly personal situations as a household clearance. Angie Hiesl + Roland Kaiser take this responsibility seriously by giving away or donating many items or sending them for upcycling after the last performance.

As a result, the story of these things continues – indefinitely.

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